

## Book Reviews

### **The Imperial Collection of Audubon Animals, edited by Victor H. Cahalane. Country Life, 5 gns.**

The stature of John James Audubon is so great and so internationally established that he has become something of a yardstick for the comparison of all other work in his field. I believe one has to be American to appreciate just how vast was his personal contribution to science and culture. He was more than a great artist naturalist because his impact was upon the history of a nation. Americans, too, are more easily able to visualise just what was entailed in Audubon's decision, with his son-in-law the Rev John Bachman in 1831, to complete a full-scale work on the mammals of the North American continent – desert and mountain, forest and prairie, from the Gulf of Mexico to the high Arctic – at a time when travel was measured in months and the west was really wild.

Audubon was already nationally famous as a bird painter when work began, but mammals, by their very nature more elusive, present an illustrator with greater problems. Not surprisingly, references proved inadequate and hard to find. It takes little imagination to visualise what a snow-shoe rabbit would look like after weeks' travelling from Nova Scotia in a keg of rum, yet this kind of offering was apt to be his only 'model' for some of his subjects. Despite his devotion he was something of a dreamer, the more practical and less emotional Bachman would have to draw him away from the enchanting spectacles of scenery, buffalo hunts, and great herds moving on the plains. Bachman was there to remind him, as he contentedly sketched a pretty squaw astride her pony, that a host of ground squirrels, gophers, chipmunks and mini-rodents clamoured to be classified and drawn. It seems to speak volumes for both Bachman's tact and Audubon's affection for him, that the pastor survived the exercise. The work was completed 17 years later despite technical problems, worries and frictions that hastened the deaths of Audubon's two sons who before the end had both been drawn into the work. Plates appeared in various folio forms and in reduced sizes but this new presentation must be the finest tribute of all. The reproductions are excellent. Each picture is supported, not only by Bachman's original text, but by Victor Cahalane's up to date descriptions making it a first-class reference book of North American mammals, omitting only bats, seals and whales.

Because of Audubon's magic it is a true picture book. The subjects have the same decorative quality as his birds – a little fantasy, an overwhelming display of artistry and design skill; yet one feels that, despite his meticulous mapping of surface detail, Audubon knew no desire to show evidence of life beneath the skin.

KEITH SHACKLETON

### **Galapagos, Islands of Birds, by Bryan Nelson. Longmans, 50s.**

Although the Charles Darwin Foundation has done a creditable job in promoting conservation in the Galapagos, lack of funds and the difficulty in preventing land settlement have meant that little of the archipelago is yet safe for posterity. This book will do much to bring home to the public the importance of preserving this unique area and the work which is being undertaken by scientists based at the Charles Darwin Research Station. It is extremely well written, if slightly verbose, and incorporates a mine of information on the author's main interests, sea-birds and especially gannets and boobies. Chapters are devoted to different sea-birds, their breeding biology and behaviour, sea-lions, the guano birds of